

SI

The Spectator

The Spectator
Madeline Hutchinson
Karen Lamassonne:
Ruido/Noise
December 9, 2022

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Karen Lamassonne Creates Noise at the Swiss Institute

Reading Time: 4 minutes

Issue 7, Volume 113

By Madeline Hutchinson

Housed rather fittingly on St. Marks Place is Karen Lamassonne's first solo exhibition outside of Colombia: *Ruido / Noise* at the Swiss Institute. St. Marks Place, lined with smoke shops, Tarot card readers, handicrafts, and crystal dealers, has historically been the nucleus of the East Village's rebellion against mainstream culture. *Ruido / Noise* caters perfectly to the essence of St. Marks Place, as it is an exhibition jammed with Lamassonne's artfully raucous oppositions to male-dominated, Eurocentric depictions of female nudity.

Although Lamassonne was born in the United States, she spent the majority of her life revisiting her Colombian heritage as she bounced between the two cultures. Her current exhibition, *Ruido / Noise*, is a retrospective of her work, revealing the early influence of politics and culture on her developing identity.

"Homenaje a Cali" ("Homage to Cali") is imbued with her multiculturalism, and challenges cultural expectations for female artists to reject sensuality. This collection is the striking introduction to *Ruido / Noise*, affixed upon a red wall that immediately

greet the viewer upon entrance to the exhibition. The collection of six large-scale acrylic paintings imposes an overarching sense of grandeur, running parallel to Lamassonne's purposeful use of proportion and setting the precedent for the rest of the show.

Through this chronological exhibit, viewers can witness how Lamassonne's artistic style transcends locality and time throughout the two floors the exhibit encompasses. The first floor primarily displays Lamassonne's paintings, representative of the most fruitful era of her artistic career, the 1980s and '90s. Here, we see the works of Lamassonne as a young artist. Drawing clear aesthetic inspirations from Alice Neel, Lamassonne ventures deep into the universe of color, utilizing vibrant paint strokes to cultivate a dynamic response to her perceived reality. There is something distinctly voyeuristic about "Homenaje a Cali" (1989), as each painting is a passionate portrayal of the erotic intimacy of gigantic lovers, juxtaposed with the geometric landscape of Cali.

Lamassonne combats the rigid lines of the colorful churches and apartments in the city with the organic quality of the lovers' sexual encounter. Lamassonne manipulates the composition to create a puzzling duplexity; she presents a narrative that is so promiscuous that the viewer cannot help but feel is invasive, yet achieves it so artfully that it is impossible to look away. Startled by the scene against the bustling landscape of Cali, the viewer is left wondering what exactly they are witnessing. Is this consensual? Should this be seen?

"La Venida de la Ceiba" ("The Coming of the Ceiba"), the third painting in "Homenaje a Cali," is the archetype of the aforementioned paradox. Two grayscale figures are intertwined in a bare Ceiba tree, a common tree of the tropics of the Americas. Bright yellows and pinks depict a kaleidoscopic urban environment contrasting with the monochromatic couple's intimate engagement. Life presumably continues in the surroundings, while the composition crops the main subjects to accentuate the aggressive and passionate yet unbothered coupling.

Environmental influence extends beyond "Homenaje a Cali," as it is an underlying theme in the entirety of Ruido / Noise. Lamassonne constantly transforms traditionally stagnant structures, such as Cali's colonial European architecture, and seamlessly integrates humanity and fluidity into these forms. The space offers an apropos setting for Lamassonne's works. The Swiss Institute is an unusual gallery, as it was formerly a

bank with an active vault. The architectural setting of the Swiss Institute successfully delivers the art's purpose, as Lamassonne utilizes the awkward placement of the vault to her advantage, displaying her work the way it was intended to be viewed. Behind a heavy black curtain lays three paintings shrouded in darkness. Perpendicular to each painting is a retro TV, looping staticky snow and emitting ambient noise. Lamassonne cultivates perpetuity and endlessness in the cramped space of the vault as the light quality of the room mirrors that of her paintings. The subject matter of the paintings, legs emerging from the darkened obscurity of domestic scenes, is also solely illuminated by a blank TV screen.

Lamassonne challenges the viewer to experience discomfort in this exhibit, and the selected sexualized depictions suggest a taboo sentiment for this formal gallery setting. Seeing such intimate works in a perceivably cold, industrial setting adds to the viewer's unease. Another paradox exists in the disparity of color; Lamassonne's works, vividly depicting the culture of Bogotá, contrast with the exhibit's sterile setting.

Perhaps the pinnacle of the Ruido / Noise exhibition is the thumbnails for *Pura Sangre* (1982), composed of 63 ink drawings. Lamassonne made these in conjunction with her role as artistic director for the movie. Many artists from Cali contributed to *Pura Sangre*, a crime film directed by Luis Ospina. Lamassonne uses thin, jagged lines and red accents to convey the vampiric and horrific nature of the film. The movie is based on the horrific account of children being randomly murdered on Colombian streets with little judicial consequence, protesting Colombia's flawed justice system.

Exploring the second floor, Lamassonne's more recent works diverge from her typical watercolor and acrylic paintings, exploring unconventional mediums. At first glance, Lamassonne's artistic style is unrecognizable, as it transitions abruptly from the floor below. In the corner sits a grotesque hand sculpture. Diagonally, a retro TV flashes stills of an animation in which a scarf is falling off a hanger. Flush against the wall is a compilation of comical sketches evocative of still animation. On an angled table below are two inverted orange and blue screen prints of—you guessed it—intertwined nudes. The subject matter is distinct from Lamassonne's domain—the reduction of intimacy as a mere act of passion in an unphased environment. We gain insight into Lamassonne's matured perspective later in life as she now simplifies intimacy into abstraction.

When the exhibit is seen in its entirety, viewers are gifted with Lamassonne's evolution as a woman and as someone bridging two cultures. The thought-provoking exhibition raises questions about intimacy and physicality. Which aspects of sensuality are socially acceptable to share? Lamassonne poses this question to the viewer through her stimulating artwork as we are left to consider the moral repercussions of absorbing the vulnerability she outlines on the canvas. Younger viewers may appreciate how artists boldly addressed these issues in the 1980s, when there was little dialogue about sexual experiences. Lamassonne's courage to confront norms as a Colombian woman is commendable. Her juxtapositions disrupt cultural expectations of what a female artist is supposed to paint, and she recalls the power of the novel artist to challenge thinking.